

Top Tips for Overcoming Anorexia

Seek Help Now

Eating disorders are ego-syntonic which means that people with eating disorders will deny that they have an eating disorder or minimise the seriousness of their symptoms. Your teen will try to tell you that you're making a big deal out of nothing, but trust your parent intuition and if you have concerns seek help. Research tells us that early intervention is critical to positive treatment outcomes.

Eating disorders should be treated by a team of professionals, including a GP or paediatrician, a clinical psychologist, and a dietician. Make sure everyone on your treatment team has experience working with eating disorders.

Learn about Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are complex psychological disorders and most parents find it hard to understand why their child won't eat. What's even more confusing is that your child prefers weight loss to being healthy and safe. Knowing more about eating disorders and how they work will help you to help your child. "Help Your Child Beat an Eating Disorder" by James Lock and Daniel Le Grange is a great resource for parents. "Unbearable Lightness" by Portia De Rossi is also a good insight into the anorexic mind.

Avoid Talking about Diet, Body Shape + Weight

Parents don't cause eating disorders but your words and actions can influence your child's distress. Avoid criticising your own body and appearance or the appearance and physique of others in front of your child. Your child will be sensitive to comments like this and it will trigger them to criticise their own body and appearance.

Avoid commenting on your child's appearance or their eating during meal times. Even positive comments will be twisted by an eating disorder. When you tell your child that they look good or that you're proud of them for eating dinner, your child will hear "I think you're fat". Until your child is ready, it's best to avoid talking about diet, body, shape and weight all together.

Encourage Family Meals

Adolescents with eating disorders often prefer to prepare their own meals and to eat away from the rest of the family, but this is unhelpful in the longer-term. Try to introduce structure and routine around meal times. Have meals together as a family and try to eat meals at roughly the same time each day. If your child isn't eating at school, additional strategies may need to be put in place to overcome this.

When your child has an eating disorder meal times can be extremely stressful, but keeping calm will help to contain your child's distress.

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Anorexia Nervosa

Anorexia Nervosa is a complex psychological disorder with serious medical consequences. Anorexia usually starts in early adolescence, but children as young as 8 might be diagnosed with the disorder.

Eating disorders are nearly always preceded by a period of dieting motivated by weight loss or a desire to be 'healthier'. Junk food is usually the first food group to be cut out, but other major food groups (e.g. protein, carbohydrates, dairy) are eventually cut out as well.

Over time, meals gets smaller and the range of food that a child is willing to eat is more restricted. Other red flags for eating disorders are:

- A sudden interest in healthy eating
- Calorie counting apps
- Skipping meals
- Picky eating
- A shift in diet (e.g. vegetarian diet)
- Wanting to eat alone
- Visits to thinspiration sites
- Visits to the bathroom after eating
- Missing food

Early intervention is critical in the treatment of eating disorders. Many parents wait to see if their child's dieting is a phase and later regret not seeking help earlier.

If you're concerned about your child's eating habits speak to your GP about a referral to a clinical psychologist.